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Food in the Reconstruction Period

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IF food played a vital part in winning the war it occupies relatively an even more important place in bringing about tranquility during the armistice and in the period of reconstruction. The drastic food regulations imposed upon our country shortly after our entering the war were cheerfully accepted on the assurance of Mr. Hoover and the President that the regulations were a matter of a military necessity.

The effectiveness and success of the Food Administration was largely due to the fact that it reached every man, woman and child in the nation, as well as the men, women and children of the Allies and those of the neutral countries dependent upon us. The stimulation of industry and business in the United States so greatly increased the purchasing power of our people that if they had been so inclined they could easily have consumed and paid for a large portion of the food that we exported as well as that which was used. The stabilization of food prices by the enforcement of the law requiring middle men to sell all food products at cost plus a pre-war profit, without regard to market or replacement value, would also have encouraged an abnormally large consumption were it not for the conservation regulations voluntarily observed by the rank and file of our people. The habit of the general public in adapting their diet to those foods which the market afforded, as compared with what they ordinarily demanded, played a large part in bringing about the desired results.

REDUCED INCOMES AND FOOD PRICES

In this period of reconstruction the average income of our workers is materially reduced and advantage must be taken of the habits, acquired of necessity during the war, of substituting the use of those foods which are abundant and relatively cheap in price for those foodstuffs which under normal conditions we have been accustomed to demand. In the exigencies of the present situation there is an urgent demand for statutory regulations

that will afford relief. The people on the one hand wish to be freed from the onerous regulations and exactions of the war food laws in the matter of what they shall and what they shall not eat, and on the other hand be protected against high prices and profiteering.

We are confronted with a condition and not a theory; substantial relief will not come to the public by the enacting of new laws against profiteering. The unalterable law of supply and demand will determine the price of food. Herbert Hoover did not, as some suppose, suspend the law of supply and demand. He persuaded the public to stop *demanding* certain foods in the usual quantities, in consideration of which he was able to furnish what food was actually *needed* at a stabilized and comparatively reasonable price.

The law regulating the profits of middle men without being accompanied concurrently by a voluntary general conservation in the use of food on the part of the public would not tend to lower or stabilize the price to the consumer. Any profits that such a law would keep back from the middle man would automatically go to the producer. This is an indisputable and well-established fact, although difficult to comprehend on the part of many of our best economists. It is a fact which must be recognized immediately not only by the public but by Congress, if the real solution of the present difficulties is to be found and made effective.

The solution of the problem of a decreased income and sustained high prices on many foodstuffs is found in the general adoption of the same habits of substitution and conservation in the use of foodstuffs as were practiced of necessity during the war. He that controlleth his own appetite and adapteth his taste to what the market affords is greater than he that deviseth many laws against profiteering. In other words, this which the public is looking to the law makers to supply them with in the form of protection against exorbitant food prices lies within their own control. Necessity is the mother of invention. Misfortunes and even calamities are frequently blessings in disguise. It would indeed be unfortunate if the valuable lessons in diet and in marketing, which we were just beginning to learn, were not driven home by a continued application during this period of readjustment.

The grossest ignorance exists in this country as to the relative

values of our large variety of foodstuffs. There are scores of different kinds of foodstuffs which can be produced at one-third to one-half the cost of production of the kinds of food which we have customarily consumed. True, it will require perhaps greater culinary skill to prepare these foods acceptably, but it is all within easy reach of accomplishment. Could the public believe this possible by making habitual and general those simple conservation measures which amounted to enough during the war to feed one hundred and twenty millions of our Allies without creating any undue hardship on our own people, they would seek some agency that would direct and lead to such a movement.

The officials of the United States Food Administration in connection with the United States Department of Agriculture, Office of Markets, have formulated a system of publicity which will inform and educate the public to a certain degree, particularly on perishable foodstuffs. Much more needs to be done in the matter of information and education in the more staple lines. This would afford a splendid activity for those organized agencies which developed such a high state of efficiency in contributing to the winning of the war.

There is conspicuous absence of common sense and reasoning in the consideration of the food problems. It is difficult, though perhaps necessary, to make provision for that considerable portion of our people who live one day at a time. No measure has been discovered to assist them,—indeed it may be undesirable to afford permanent help to those people who will not help themselves. There is almost universal complaint on the part of the consumer because of the apparent profiteering on the part of the producer, and a lack of understanding as to why the producer's prices are not regulated. The average family should not be so much interested in the cost of living this week or this month as they are in the average cost of living during the next twelve months, or in fact, as they are in the average cost of living during the entire reconstruction period of several years' duration.

BRINGING DOWN THE COST OF LIVING

Once again let me emphasize the indisputable fact that there are only two ways of bringing down the cost of living. First, by increasing the supply which is accomplished by paying the producer an attractive price for his product. Within a reasonable

time this invariably results in greatly increased production (except for providential interference). Second, by the economical use and wise choice of the kinds of foods consumed—in other words, the voluntary regulation of the demand. These two factors, an increasing supply on the one hand, and a decreasing or well controlled demand on the other hand, will give an average cost of foodstuffs which must be most satisfactory and gratifying.

To expect the food supply and prices to remain on an even level during these abnormal reconstruction days when the whole world is looking to the American market for an undue share of our supplies, would be to expect conditions that obtain in no other department of life. Hence the importance of acquiring the habit of adapting oneself to the supplies in the market and of accepting some of the ups and downs of prices in the cost of living. We must recognize that of a necessity some periods of weeks or months naturally will favor the producer. This will be a period of high prices, which in turn will stimulate increased production. Other periods of low prices, of corresponding length, will favor the consumer and have a tendency to decrease production.

The Food Administration in conjunction with the federal and state departments have also formulated and encouraged the passing of laws which will regulate to a reasonable degree the distributors of foodstuffs. Among other things it is proposed that many classes of middle men shall be re-licensed, particularly commission merchants and the packers. The National League of Commission Merchants at their annual convention in January at Boston adopted resolutions favoring the licensing of the commission business in fruits and vegetables. This will tend to eliminate the tricky and dishonest factors in the business which alike is a protection to the public and to the legitimate members of the trade.

In considering these vital food matters I have purposely refrained from referring to the larger and more unselfish question of conservation and the habits of eating which will best enable us to succor a famine-stricken Europe. It is obvious that what will serve our own economic needs in the matter of controlling the cost of living at home will most effectually aid those millions of stricken humanity in the war-devastated regions of Europe, many millions of whom it must be remembered are suffering terribly from wounds and disease directly due to the war.